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Book Review of Sami Schalk's *Black Disability Politics*



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“There is no racism without ableism. There is no ableism without racism. You quite literally can’t have one without the other.” Quoting abolitionist community lawyer, educator, and organizer Talila A. Lewis, scholar Dr. Sami Schalk reveals how an intersectional understanding of the relationship between systems of oppression shapes political approaches to social change and organizing. *Black Disability Politics* explores how Black cultural workers’ engagement with disability from the 1970s to the present day is overlooked in both disability studies and Black studies. Arguing that the misrecognition of this history is due to the ways Black folks might approach disability differently than the mainstream, predominantly white, disability rights movement, the book also recognizes the way that racist violence produces disability

in unique ways inside of Black communities.

An extension of Schalk’s previous work on disability, race, and gender in American culture and literature (particularly 2018’s *Bodyminds Reimagined*), *Black Disability Politics* looks at how Black communities engage with disability as a social and political issue. Identifying the perceived and real separation between the mainstream disability rights movement and the Black radical movement, Schalk takes a close look at political approaches within the context of Black communities, looking at disability through a lens of anti-Blackness. Drawing on thorough research in the archives of the Black Panther Party and the National Black Women’s Health Project, and interviews with contemporary Black disabled activists and cultural workers, Dr. Schalk explores how issues of disability have been central to Black activism, demonstrating that the work of Black disability politics not only exists but is essential to the future of Black liberation movements. The Black Panther Party’s anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist work, along with the National Black Women’s Health Project’s commitment to holistic practices concerning physical, mental and spiritual wellness, exemplify how activist organizations long understood that disability rights were interconnected to the work that they were doing for anti-Black racism. This understanding of disability rights and access for disabled people as an oppressed community, whose liberation was tied to wider Black liberation as well, challenges the frequent misrecognition that occurs and typically goes unchecked in scholarly evaluations of disability in Black activism and culture. Engaging and elevating the current movement for Black lives and disability rights, Schalk also does the work of not just echoing the history and legacies that came before, but shifting the conversations and intersectional quality of Black disability politics. She offers an alternative to the individual stories of overcoming that dominate mainstream media coverage. *Black*

BOOK REVIEW: *BLACK DISABILITY POLITICS*

Disability Politics identifies the constructed social hierarchies that inform both racism and ableism, focusing on ableism as a systemic, political issue.

Despite its title, *Black Disability Politics* refers to social movements and activism more than electoral politics or government policy. Still, the book explores questions of what it looks like to honor the history and legacy of the disability rights movement and the civil rights movement through language, legislation and organizing. The book is divided into 5 chapters, alongside an introduction that lays the foundation, grounding the work that will follow in conversation with past and current discourse, and two praxis interludes that emphasize the intertwined nature of multiple social justice issues, and explicitly outline various approaches to disability identity, and fighting disabling violence. Speaking directly to activists, organizers and cultural workers, *Black Disability Politics* details the lessons we can learn from history in order to do better Black disability political work and organizing today, aligning with disability rights work rather than the medical models of disability.

True to the book's championing of accessibility, the text is readable and easily accessible, both in

terms of language and the perceived proximity of the author to the subject matter explored and the research conducted. A shared sense of community—particularly but not limited to Black and disabled people—is communicated, foregrounding one of the author's main goals: to bring people into the movement, and bridge the gap between assumptions and lived realities.

Essential reading for writers, intellectuals, organizers, and artists alike, committed to creating systemic change and collective liberation, *Black Disability Politics* argues that an understanding of the interconnectedness between racism and ableism is not just useful, but required. Based on disability scholarship, and ushered in through a larger understanding of anti-Black violence and anti-Black racism, Schalk's text considerably builds a collective knowledge base that invites collective participation and the continued expansion of this knowledge. Ultimately, she charts a path forward for political organizing and the dismantling of oppressive systems, prioritizing understanding and intersectionality within the context of white supremacy.

Dineo Maine is a Master's student in the Division of Cinema and Media Studies at the University of Southern California. Originally from Botswana, she holds a BA in Comparative Literature from San Diego State University. Her research interests center around postcolonial and decolonial literature + theory, archival studies, African cinema and Afro-diasporic cinema.